Russ Chew 1-800-FAA-NEWS Phone Message
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Hello, this is Russ Chew with this week's update for March 10th.

This week I'd like to talk about our operating quality and efficiency. Because when it comes to the ATO's goals for a safe and reliable air traffic system, this is where we are measured by our customers and owners.

While we work hard to maintain almost perfect reliability, any system failure, no matter how small or rare, can put a strain on our customer's operation, and easily inconvenience literally tens of thousands of air travelers – even if the failure was for just a short time.

This week we suffered two outages that impacted our customers significantly. On Monday, one of the radar systems feeding data to the Chicago TRACON failed, resulting in increased separation requirements. It was caused by our supporting network circuits going down; and as it turns out, was not a technical problem but an administrative one. It was related to our transition to a more modern network architecture, which is a very large and complex effort, involving the changing of 25,000 circuits at more than 4,400 sites.

Because the weather had already caused several ground delay programs in the airspace, only 69 delays were directly attributed to this 3-hour outage. But had it been a good weather day, hundreds of the so-called "weather" delays would have been attributed to the outage itself. In review, although we had developed a thorough and documented disconnect management process, we did not anticipate the specifics of the Chicago scenario. We have taken immediate action to change our disconnect confirmation process so this does not recur.

Also last Tuesday, the host computer at New York Center had to be shut down and restarted because of a software glitch. Though the outage lasted less than an hour, it caused hundreds of flight delays and reroutes. During the outage, our controllers skillfully transitioned to the backup radar, increased mile-in-trail restrictions, and ground-stopped the traffic bound for New York airports. Because of high traffic volume in and out of the New York area, the impact and recovery from the outage lasted well into the night.

While our investigation continues, it looks like a software upgrade from last year contained a bug related to flight plan data processing. Our software engineers have identified the offending code, and have already started working on a fix. Meanwhile, our 11 other facilities that installed this upgrade are taking immediate action to prevent this problem with their host systems.

That said, I want to thank all of you for keeping the system safe and reliable. With more than 40,000 individual systems to run around the clock, it is a testament to the hard work, skill, and dedication of our technicians that the events like the ones we had this week are rare.

Runway safety continues to be a high priority issue. In the past two years, we have had five serious runway incursion events where our "taxi into position and hold" procedure was considered a factor. After reviewing our current procedures, we found them to be too general to ensure the required levels of operational safety at our 500 or so control towers. This is why we recently released a general notice, or GENOT, on this issue.

The reality of "taxi into position and hold" is that as a controller tool, many of our facilities use it effectively to increase both safety and efficiency at the same time. By improving the predictability of how long a pilot will use the runway for takeoff, we can improve how well we can separate that airplane from others.

The GENOT is just the beginning of a process to document and evaluate our use of this tool. Because each airport tower and runway configuration is unique, we have asked each facility who needs and effectively uses it to request a temporary waiver from the new GENOT requirements before it goes into effect. Then, in the months ahead, our ATO quality assurance staff will work closely with our towers managers to build the required safety analysis, and extend these waivers as approved.

I can't understate the importance of codifying our safety practices, and this effort will document the specific local procedures for each control tower. As a performance-based organization, it sets the stage to hold ourselves accountable for following the procedures we set for ourselves.

That's all for this week. Thanks for listening.